

Newcomers Bristling With Hope

By Brenda Cronin
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Lucas Blalock, 'Donkeys Crossing the Desert' (2019). PHOTO: LUCAS BLALOCK/GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER, NY AND ZURICH/RODOLPHE JANSSEN, BRUSSELS

When Matthew Angelo Harrison and Lucas Blalock were invited to participate in the Whitney Museum of American Art's 2019 Biennial, they were inspired to think big. Mr. Blalock's enormous photographic mural, "Donkeys Crossing the Desert," will be displayed on a billboard across from the museum. Mr. Harrison encapsulated Malian spears in resin towers that rise 8 feet high.

They are among 75 artists and collectives in the Whitney Biennial, a survey of contemporary American art that opens May 17 in New York. Since the first Whitney Biennial in 1932, the show has become a high-profile showcase across a host of media, including painting, installations and choreography. Curators Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley winnowed their list of participants after devoting months to more than 300 studio visits across the U.S., including Puerto Rico.

"It's the most exciting exhibition I've been a part of and one of the most exciting I ever will be a part of," said Mr. Harrison, a 29-year-old sculptor who works in Hamtramck, Mich.

The Biennial, which also has film, video and performance programs, will unfold in and around the Whitney in downtown Manhattan, starting with Mr. Blalock's billboard. Mr. Blalock, who is based in Brooklyn, takes pictures and digitally alters them. "Donkeys Crossing the Desert" is a composite photograph that is 17 feet high and 29 feet wide. It depicts three very different donkeys, he said: The one on the left side looks real, the one in the center is a deflated toy and the one on the right is "a skeletal, very virtual-feeling donkey." The work is "an allegorical picture about these characters who are crossing an expanse of scarcity," Mr. Blalock said. "You're sort of watching this kind of de-evolution taking place from the left to the right."

When the Whitney curators proposed that he take on the billboard for the Biennial, the 40-year-old artist recalled feeling more excited than nervous—and struck by the technical challenges such a work entailed. "It was a great opportunity to think about what to do in a public space at that scale," he said. The billboard also can be seen in augmented reality through an app.

The museum's third floor will display a collection of photographs by another Biennial artist, Curran Hatleberg. In one image, two slabs of glistening watermelon are overrun by bees. Another is a portrait of a bald, implacable figure in a yellow T-shirt, with a ruff of bees, like buzzing chain mail, from his cheeks to his chest.

Mr. Hatleberg initially was skeptical when he received an email last year from the Whitney requesting a studio visit. "I was completely shocked and sort of bowled over, just because it was so unexpected," said the artist, who turns 37 this month. "I thought someone from grad school might be pulling a prank." Mr. Hatleberg lives in Baltimore but travels almost half the year for his work, heading to different parts of the U.S. and embedding himself in communities that he photographs with his Mamiya 7 camera. "So much about the work is driving around, getting lost, waiting to meet people—and then once I do, building trust and establishing friendships," he said. "But every relationship starts because a person kind of fascinates me, you know? I'm under their spell for one reason or another."



Nicole Eisenman, 'The General' (2018). PHOTO: NICOLE EISENMAN/SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS

The Biennial's roughly 300 works will spill out beyond the Whitney's galleries. One terrace will display "Procession," an installation by Nicole Eisenman that includes "The General," her sculpture of a head and shoulders made of bronze, stainless steel and other materials. Another terrace will have a video sculpture

garden by Meriem Bennani. Rather than showing contributors' work separately, galleries will display pieces by several complementary artists "in dialogue with one another," Ms. Panetta said, reflecting the spirit of community that she and Ms. Hockley sensed during studio visits.

Many participants are between 30 and 40 years old and are first-timers at the Biennial. "There are many artists in the show that have day jobs," Ms. Panetta said. Starting in late 2017, she and Ms. Hockley cast a wide net, conducting their own research for potential participants and fielding recommendations from colleagues, curators and others. "We tried to get out of just the Los Angeles-New York kind of corridors," Ms. Panetta said. In Birmingham, Ala., they visited Joe Minter's collection of sculptural assemblages that examine the experience of Africans in America. Among the 76-year-old artist's works in the Biennial is "'63 Foot Soldiers," made of license plates, shoes, toys, clothes and other materials.



Joe Minter, '63 Foot Soldiers' (1999). PHOTO: JOE MINTER/ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

The curators prescribed no themes for the Biennial but spotted common topics in the work, such as gender, race, gentrification and financial inequality. Many artists are struggling with student debt and work at home because studio space is expensive, Ms. Panetta said. But both curators said the show bristles with optimism, not gloom, reflecting artists seeking productive solutions and not despairing.

In addition, much of the art has a "makerly feel," Ms. Hockley said. "There's not a lot of hyper-finished, super-slick works. You can really get a sense of...the making of it."

That is true for Mr. Harrison, who makes the 3-D printers and precision cutting machines with which he sculpts. A native of Detroit, he learned how to build equipment when working at Ford Motor Company after college, making life-size clay models of vehicles such as F-150 pickups and Mustangs. Mr. Harrison's studio is down the street from the former factory where his mother worked on an assembly line, making parts for cars.

"So many people who have raised me have worked in a plant or worked for an auto maker or worked in the military...so machinery, hardware, all that stuff, is very common, tangible tech to me," he said. "I thought about ways of making that are an extension of my hands, as an artist, as opposed to just like this magical thing that can cut things perfectly."